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Water ski area may be moved

By **TRISTAN BAURICK** Staff Writer

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Skiers may be relocated from inner Eagle Harbor, to an area near Pritchard Park.

Eagle Harbor could buzz with much more activity this summer as rules governing vessel speeds and water skiing are re-examined.

The City Council will discuss code changes, possibly allowing rowing club boats and their support vessels to exceed 5 knots. The proposed changes would also allow water skiing off Pritchard Park, west of Bill Point.

Councilman Jim Llewellyn, an active water-skier, helped draft the changes with provisions he hopes will please water sports enthusiasts and shore residents.

"I expect cooperation among the various stakeholders," Llewellyn said.

"As water skiers, we respect others' right to use the harbor. I hope an amicable relationship can be reached."

But harbor shore resident Stephen Ekholm wants stronger restrictions on motorized sport vessels in the inner-harbor, similar to ones advocated by the city Harbor Commission.

"With its natural beauty, its still waters and its proximity to major population centers here on Bainbridge, the inner harbor is ideally suited for rowing, kayaking, sailing and other non-motorized sports," he said, adding that water skiing and other motorized sports will "insure damage to private property caused by wakes."

The council considered restricting motorized sport vessels in the inner-harbor near the Head of the Bay four years ago, with supporters citing proximity to the "aquatic conservancy zone" and sensitive eelgrass habitat.

But water sports enthusiasts prevailed, with water skiing permitted between May and September in a narrow channel 200 feet from shores and docks.

During its recent deliberations, the council's Land Use Committee rejected the Harbor Commission's recommendation for a full inner-harbor skiing ban, but added language to the ordinance that would restrict vessel wakes to 9 inches.

The commission is asking the City Council to reconsider alterations to their recommendation.

"We've gone back with a statement to council saying we'd like to see no water skiing in the inner harbor," said commission chair Rob Jacques. "We need to study the effects of it on aquatic lands and the conservancy because there is evidence of some degree of erosion."

Jacques also believes the inner-harbor is too small for fast-moving vessels.

"It's more confined and that would suggest danger with an increase of aquatic activity, especially at the rate (the harbor's use) is growing," he

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said.

Commission members advocated opening up waters off Pritchard Park to mitigate water skiers' possible loss of the inner-harbor. This recommendation was included in the Land Use Committee's draft.

"Off Pritchard Park is a better place for water skiing," Jacques said.

"There's no large vessels, nothing moored and nothing anchored."

Jacques is pleased that the Land Use Committee stuck with the commission's recommendation to allow higher speeds for rowing clubs. Llewellyn agreed that the club's occasional human-powered bursts past the 5 knot speed limit is not a safety hazard.

"We're not talking a quantum leap in speed," he said. "It's really the wake by the (motorized) mother boat that could be a concern. We're not worried about the rowers."

The ordinance stipulates that the club's motorized support vessels must have low wakes and be clearly marked.

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Postponed

The City Council's scheduled discussion of Eagle Harbor vessel speeds has been deleted from the agenda of Wednesday's council meeting, and will be rescheduled.

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